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OPERATIONAL ART
IN MILITARY OPERATIONS OTHER THAN WAR

by


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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT

The United States military has had difficulty in the past contending with what are today known as Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). A number of explanations for this can be offered, but one reason which has not been fully explored has been our failure to develop an operational art specifically for MOOTW. This paper argues for the need to create an operational art which is tailored to the unique needs of MOOTW. It discusses several components which should be included, and compares their application in MOOTW to that of conventional warfare. Areas explored include theater structure and organization, operational elements of warfare, operational design and principles of war.

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INTRODUCTION:

The United States has found itself involved in what today is referred to as military operations other than war (MOOTW)

since its earliest days.¹ Our overall performance in these encounters, particularly in the past few decades has been at best mixed. More often than not, the outcome has been either a limited success or on some occasions, a complete failure which has come at a significant cost in both human lives and

national prestige.² The images of the failed hostage rescue effort in Iran, the interoperability issues in Grenada, the tragic loss of 241 Marines in Beirut, and the recent troubles we have had in Somalia all serve as grim reminders of the United States' difficulty conducting small scale military operations other than war.

How could the most powerful nation on earth, with its vast technological advantage, enormous intelligence apparatus and overwhelming numbers of both forces and firepower blunder so often when confronting "small" challenges such as these? The reasons are many and varied. Most often, a combination of misguided political leadership; an inflexible and bureaucratic military structure organized, trained and equipped predominantly to fight a large scale war; or the fear of applying too much force at the risk of escalation with the

former Soviets are blamed.³ There is validity in each of these arguments; however, there is another issue which has

contributed significantly to our difficulties in this arena. With the simultaneous dawn of the cold war and the nuclear age, the U.S. military and the civilian establishment that it answered to generally abandoned the concept of operational art in favor of the new found construct of nuclear deterrence. By the early 1950s the prevalent belief was that operational art was irrelevant. Either deterence would work, or if it failed, things would escalate to wholesale nuclear exchange so quickly as to obviate such notions as operational art and conventional

⁴ warfare. Our failures in Viet Nam led to a renewed interest in operational art, primarily however as it applied to conventional conflict. Until very recently, no real effort was made to develop an operational art that applies specifically to MOOTW. This has led to a shortfall in the knowledge of commanders and their staffs as to how best to contend with smaller scale, less conventional undertakings. Accordingly, when MOOTW scenarios have presented themselves, we have been unprepared doctrinally to deal with them, and as a result have often come up short in our attempts to conduct

⁵ MOOTW successfully. By now however, the lesson is clear. MOOTW differs significantly from conventional operations in many respects, and accordingly it requires an operational art tailored specifically to fit its unique qualities.

For our purposes, MOOTW is defined as the use of military or paramilitary forces to achieve military objectives, but on a scale smaller than conventional war. It includes nation

assistance, insurgency, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism operations, raids, rescue missions, peace-keeping operations, counter-drug efforts and the like.

6

With this definition in mind, it is evident that MOOTW scenarios will likely contain a far more prevalent political element than conventional operations, which can lead to far greater restraint being placed on the operational commander. In addition, they may have far more intangible objectives, an ill-defined and more elusive opponent, longer duration, and a significantly different operational environment that may range from urban to deeply isolated jungle operations. Further, MOOTW may be conducted within the broader context of a larger unilateral effort which may involve additional governmental agencies such as the State or Treasury departments, or the FBI. Further still, the military component of these operations may find itself the subordinate element in the overall effort. MOOTW may also be conducted as a part of a multinational effort in conjunction with United Nations, NATO

7

or other alliance partners.

A final distinction involves the difference in the levels of conflict between MOOTW and conventional war. The latter is conducted on three levels, tactical, operational and theater-strategic, with the operational level linking the two ends. MOOTW rarely involves the operational level. Rather it uses a series of tactical actions (raids, surveillance efforts etc.) linked together as part of an overall strategic campaign. We

may conduct anti-drug or anti-terrorist campaigns for instance, but we do not do so in conjunction with what could be termed major operations. All of these potential factors set MOOTW apart from conventional operations and provide a unique set of challenges to those who must plan and execute them.

Operational art as it applies to conventional warfare and as it applies to MOOTW are not diametrically opposed concepts. Operational art at its very essence asks four questions which apply to the use of military forces in any scenario: 1) What military condition must be met to produce the desired goal? 2) What sequence of actions is most likely to provide that condition? 3) How should the resources of the force be applied to accomplish the desired sequence? 4) What⁸ are the costs and risks of performing that sequence? Further, the broad concepts of operational art (operational design, leadership and training, principles of war etc.) apply in general to all operations regardless of their size or nature. Beyond these fundamental similarities however, significant differences exist in the detailed operational approach taken to conduct MOOTW from that taken to conduct conventional warfare operations. Accordingly, the operational art developed and utilized for MOOTW should have as a foundation the basic components of conventional operational art, but should build upon it a structure tailored to the unique and specific challenges of MOOTW.

This paper offers some considerations for the development of operational art for MOOTW. It examines but a few of the basic components, and outlines some of the qualities which distinguish it from its conventional counterpart. It will focus primarily on theater structure and organization, operational elements of MOOTW, principle of war and operational design. By using some examples of problems we have encountered in past MOOTW, it hopes to underscore the importance of considering these elements when planning and executing these unique and demanding missions.

THEATER AND ITS STRUCTURE: Conventional operations are generally conducted within a declared theater of war or theater of operation. These formal declarations can have a significant psychological effect on public support. When a theater of war or operation is declared, it signifies clear objectives and national intent to meet them. The enemy is well known to everyone, and an operation proceeds with the intent of defeating him in short order. As a result, public opinion is generally supportive of these operations as we witnessed for example in Desert Storm.

In MOOTW, theaters of war or operations are rarely formally declared, and this seemingly trivial distinction can have a profound impact their outcome. MOOTW are neither conducted with the size of force nor against the type of large scale opposition that requires formally declared theaters.

Without them however, MOOTW run the risk of appearing as open-ended commitments (which they often are), a phenomenon not generally supported by the American public. This may result over time in the political leadership (who are more sensitive to public opinion) making imprudent decisions, as we shall later see occurred during operation Restore Hope, or in the wholesale public outcry which occurred during the Viet Nam conflict. These situations can seriously undermine the unity of effort that is required for success, and make the conduct of MOOTW considerably more difficult for its overseers.

THEATER AND MOOTW ORGANIZATIONS: The next distinction involves the manner in which three key components of theater organization, operational intelligence, operational fires and operational logistics in MOOTW differ from larger scale conventional undertakings.

Intelligence. In conventional operations, the most useful intelligence is gathered predominantly through technical means. Large scale movements, enemy defensive capabilities etc., are all discernible using technical means. In MOOTW, however, where the opponent rarely enjoys a large armed force, technical intelligence sources are of little value. Instead, most intelligence of any use to the commander is from derived from human sources. It is impossible for example to determine an insurgent's next move from a satellite, but a well placed human source could provide this

critical information on a timely enough basis to allow development of an appropriate response.

Operational fires. These means used to to influence major operations or campaigns, and can differ markedly between these two types of warfare. In conventional operations, operational fires are used for such purposes as creating openings for maneuver, or disrupting enemy logistics. Accordingly, they predominantly require lethal means in the form of raw fire power.

In MOOTW, however, operational fires may be aimed more at intangible targets such as the state of mind of the populace, the image of the opposition leader, or the opponents will to fight. They are therefore generally more effective if of the non-lethal variety. For example, in a nation building or counter-insurgency scenario, psychological operations (signalling our desires through the use of propaganda broadcasts, deliberate misinformation campaigns etc.) and electronic warfare (prohibiting the enemy from broadcasting his own Propa Ganda) may have a far more profound influence on the outcome than an air strike or artillery barrage which may have the opposite effect of polarizing the population against us.

Logistics. This absolutely critical component of success provides another demanding challenge to MOOTW planners. The protracted nature of these events, the fact that they may occur in very isolated regions or in hostile settings which

undermine host nation support, and that they occur without the formal logistics support system established for major operations, all conspire to make sustainment of MOOTW an extremely difficult undertaking. Those charged with planning MOOTW missions must be aware of these differences, and ensure that they are dealt with appropriately.

ELEMENTS OF OPERATIONAL WARFARE: The next issues with which planners must contend are found in the identification of the opponent's critical factors, and in identifying our own points of culmination.

Centers of Gravity: Proper identification of the enemy's critical factors (i.e. strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities and most importantly centers of gravity) is fundamental to the success of any military undertaking regardless of its size. As we are reminded from the following dialogue, improper identification of centers of gravity at the strategic level can lead to failure regardless of our success at the tactical level.

"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield", said the American Colonel (to a North Vietnamese Colonel).

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment, "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also
9
irrelevant"

In conventional operations, centers of gravity at the tactical and operational level are clearly discernible. Troop

or armor concentrations, aircraft, command and control facilities etc., are possible centers of gravity at these levels, and are easily identifiable as such. At the strategic level, centers of gravity are more difficult to pin point as they may include such abstractions as national will. Nevertheless, they can be identified and targeted by astute planners.

MOOTW provides a far more challenging pursuit of the center of gravity at all levels.¹⁰ At the tactical level, rarely is the opposition's military force consolidated in a manner which would allow us to mass our forces against it. Rather, they are most often widely dispersed, highly elusive and often extremely difficult to identify.

At the strategic level, MOOTW planners must look beyond military targets for enemy COGs. They may reside in the social or political structure of the opposition, in its will to fight, in the personality of its leader, or in the simple perseverance of the populace. In other instances, it may be more evident, but highly difficult to counter. For example, in an anti-terrorist effort, hostages instantly become the COG. In an anti-drug effort, it may be the banking system which allows money to be laundered and provides the leadership its ability to acquire great wealth with impunity.¹¹

The strategic centers of gravity in MOOTW are often ambiguous or difficult to attack. Nevertheless, the lesson from Viet Nam is that despite a series of tactical wins, total

victory cannot be assured unless the strategic center of gravity is identified and destroyed as well. Accordingly, MOOTW planners must strive vigorously to identify this critical factor to ensure time, effort, and lives are not
12
waisted in the wrong pursuit.

Culmination Points: Improper identification of culmination points can lead to overextension and ultimately failure in either conventional operations or MOOTW. However, the nature of the point of culmination varies greatly between the two. In conventional warfare, culmination points are defined as, "the point in time and space at which the offensive becomes overextended and offensive combat power no longer sufficiently exceeds that of the defender to allow
13
continuation of the offense"

In MOOTW, culmination points have a very different complexion. They are more political or psychological in nature, and as with other elements of MOOTW, can be far more difficult to discern. In MOOTW, culmination points may often be measured by time. As we have noted, these can be lengthy endeavors which often occur without the benefit of any clear accomplishments. The result may be an erosion of public support for the mission, and a corresponding lack of political commitment to complete the task originally envisioned. Examples of this phenomenon include the British during the American Revolution, who after six years of failing to quell

the insurgency in the colonies essentially lost interest and went home, or our involvement in Viet Nam.

A second distinction is that culmination points in MOOTW can be exceeded as a result of political decisions. For example, in the U.S. involvement in both Beirut in 1983, and in Somalia in the early 1990s, our original missions were to be conducted as neutral, defensive forces. As events progressed in both scenarios however, political decisions gradually resulted in a commitment to one side. The result was a political overextension, an offensive military requirement for which we were not fully prepared, and in the

14
end, tragedy.

PRINCIPLES OF WAR: Given the differences between MOOTW, and conventional conflict we have discussed so far, it seems important to derive some fundamental principles which apply exclusively to MOOTW. These principles should be applicable to any scenario in order to provide basic guidance for planners.

Conventional military operations have well developed and thoroughly tested principles of war. In addition, the JCS has published its initial set of principles of MOOTW. 15 These are listed below.

Conventional Principles
of war

Objective
Offensive
Mass
Economy of Force
Maneuver
Unity of Command
Security
Surprise
Simplicity

JCS Principles of
MOOTW

Objective
Unity of Effort
Security
Restraint
Perseverance
Legitimacy

The established principles of war have clear application in large scale clashes of armor and infantry, but which of these apply to MOOTW? Massing combat power, seizing the offensive, maneuver, economy of force and surprise may in certain instances apply to MOOTW, but not with the regularity which compels them to be considered guiding principles. In some instances, these concepts may even run counter to the very nature of the MOOTW mission, particularly when it is in conjunction with a larger political effort seeking a peaceful termination. So, only a few principles from conventional war apply to MOOTW; objective, unity of effort, security and simplicity. We will examine these, and then look at the remaining three from the JCS list and determine if they properly belong in the category of principles of MOOTW.

Objectives. The primacy of having clearly defined, relevant and feasible objectives is as applicable to MOOTW as it is to conventional warfare. In both instances, objectives

determine the overall direction of the undertaking. The differences lie in the nature of these objectives, the level of difficulty in defining them, and in the more insidious nature in which they may change in MOOTW. In conventional conflicts, objectives are more easily discerned once operational centers of gravity are determined. By then deciding the best means to mass enough strength against them to gain victory, our objectives are set. As these operations or campaigns proceed, objectives may change, but they do so in a significantly more evident manner than in MOOTW, as changes in the enemy's center of gravity which may result from various combat engagements are more obvious.

In MOOTW, identifying objectives is a more difficult undertaking. The underlying difficulty lies in defining centers of gravity which, as we have said, in these scenarios can be far more elusive. Objectives can change in MOOTW too, but do so often in a less evident manner. Due to their often more political nature, MOOTW are susceptible to gradual "mission creep", directed from higher authorities. Mission creep may change the center of gravity and consequently require a reassessment of objectives. This process is often insidious however, and the changes taking place may not be identified as quickly. The result may be a disconnect between objectives and the forces available to meet them, a scenario which can end in tragedy as we learn from the following scenario from Somalia.

Operation Restore Hope underscores the importance of clearly defined, attainable objectives in MOOTW. U.S. involvement in Somalia occurred in two distinct phases, each of which had clearly different tones with respect to objective. In phase one, U.S. forces operated under the command of a U.S. officer, in pursuit of the U.S. objective set forth by President Bush to "create a secure environment in the hardest hit parts of Somalia, so that food can move from ships

16

overland to the people in the countryside". This clear guidance from the very top enabled the American commander to define his objectives and structure his force, primarily in a defensive orientation, to meet these modest but clear goals, which it for the most part did.

A new administration and more assertive U.N. however resulted in a phase two, which found U.S. forces under the de jure command of the United Nations. They were now forced to pursue the more ambiguous objectives set forth by the Secretary General to "Feed the starving, protect the defenseless and prepare the way for political, economic and

17

social reconstruction" (emphasis mine). This further political objective was obscure, and conflicted with the initial U.S. desire simply to provide humanitarian relief. The result was confusion and a rift between this new mission, and the forces available to conduct it. As the episode progressed, and U.N. took sides, American forces found themselves drawn into the offensive mission of capturing

Aideed and fighting his numerous and well trained forces. They were by then exposed to dangers with which they were not equipped to contend. Though eventually augmented with U.S. Army Rangers, they were denied the armor they needed for self protection. The end result was over 30 Americans killed.

The Somalia incident underscores the need to have clearly defined and attainable objectives, and to allocate the proper forces to meet them. In phase one of the operation, where this was the case, all went smoothly. In phase two, where it was not, the result was disaster.

Unity of Effort. Unity of effort, meaning all members of the operation working together in selfless pursuit of the desired objectives, is as important as it is often difficult to achieve in MOOTW. The matter may be particularly challenging when multiple U.S. agencies or numerous nations are participating in the operation. In these instances, chains of command can become blurred, and self aggrandizing motives may be more prevalent.

The results of a failure in unity of effort, and in pursuing motives other than those strictly operational can be seen in the 1980 effort to rescue American hostages in Iran. On April 25th, the mission was launched. In it, Marine pilots flew Navy helicopters, carried Army troops, and were supported by Air Force tankers. What may appear on the surface as a triumph of jointness was in fact the result of interservice

competition which served to seriously undermine the ability of planners to concentrate on operational unity of effort.

Instead they were forced to focus on appeasing each of the service's interests. In the words of the then National Security Advisor "interservice interests dictated very much the character of the force that was used. Every service wished to be represented in this enterprise and that did not

enhance cohesion and integration" ¹⁸ The focus of the planning as a result was on tactical execution, and appeasing feelings rather than on the overall operational effort required for success. This led to improperly assigned forces going into a mission not fully trained. The result was mission failure, national embarrassment, and the loss of eight brave Americans.

Security. October 23, 1983 provides one of the darkest days in the history of american involvement in MOOTW. On that day, at 0600, a Mercedes heavy truck, laden with nearly 12,000 pounds of explosives, and travelling at a high speed, broke through the perimeter fence, passed the sentries (who were carrying unloaded weapons), crashed into a building housing a U.S. Marine peacekeeping force and detonated. The

¹⁹ tragic result was the loss of 241 Marines.

Perhaps no other incident clarifies the absolute importance of security to MOOTW. In conventional operations, security's place is constantly reinforced by on-going combat

operations. In MOOTW, where the enemy is often difficult to clearly identify, the concept takes on a higher level of importance, because over long durations, it is possible to get lulled into a false sense of security.

Simplicity. Given the multidimensional nature of many of these operations, simplicity should remain a paramount concern to MOOTW planners. The potential participation of military forces from both our nation and others, the lengthy durations and often intangible objectives, make simplicity an absolute requirement for these undertakings. A complex plan overlapping the other factors can lead to serious difficulties in execution, and may result in a failed operation. Planners should strive to keep their undertaking as simple as possible given the existing difficulties of MOOTW in general.

Restraint, perseverance and legitimacy? Though JCS Pub 3-0 identifies these three concepts as principles of MOOTW, closer examination may make us question whether they indeed have a place among the other principles. MOOTW are still military operations after all, and conducting them under a prerequisite of restraint could be potentially dangerous. If for example the opponent is assured we will exercise restraint in all MOOTW scenarios, he may identify this as a critical vulnerability, and use this to his advantage. Perseverance may conflict with our desire to avoid surpassing the culmination point of time which often exists in MOOTW. It may

apply in certain instances, but directing it via a guiding principle of war may influence planners to automatically accept a protracted evolution when a more expedient one may do. Finally, regarding legitimacy, this concept is a valid issue, but not one for military planners to get mired in. It is more appropriately an issue which must be decided at the political level. Once legitimacy is established by political decision-makers, military planners can focus on their tasks of developing and executing a plan.

OPERATIONAL DESIGN: Operational design is the manner in which policy objectives are translated to a series of actions required to achieve them. In MOOTW, the components of this design will have a flavor quite distinct from that of conventional operations. The often protracted and politically dominated nature of MOOTW presents the commander with

significant challenges in composing his operational design. 20

A few examples of the unique nature of MOOTW's operational design which must be considered might include the following.

Methods of defeating the opponent. Massing firepower against an enemy's center of gravity is a direct approach to defeating the enemy, and the one most often utilized in conventional conflict. In MOOTW, as we have noted, the enemy's COG is more amorphous, making it difficult to attack directly. This, in conjunction with possible political constraints make an indirect approach utilizing the non-lethal

operational fires discussed earlier the manner in which these operations are conducted.

Branches and sequels. These will likely exist in MOOTW scenarios, but more frequently in the form of political vice military opportunity. An unexpected popular uprising against the leader of an insurgent opposition or an alliance that suddenly shatters for instance may provide an opening for our next move.

Operational tempo. This too exists in MOOTW, but almost always in exactly the opposite form of that desired in conventional war, one of slow, deliberate motion as opposed to lightning quick maneuver.

Operational sustainment. This provides unique challenges in MOOTW scenarios. The potential for long involvement in isolated regions in a politically constrained environment will force MOOTW logisticians to derive ways to support the efforts not required in conventional operations where the outcome occurs more quickly.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Most prognoses of future american military involvement suggest that the majority of conflicts in which we will likely become involved, will not occur as conventional, large scale war, but rather they will be military operations other than war. Though American military performance has shown improvement over the past few years in its ability to successfully conduct MOOTW (i.e.

Operation Provide Promise or Urgent Fury, which has been

described as "a masterpiece, of operational art")²¹, it is nevertheless important that we take note of the past record in its entirety. To best avoid repeating some of the missteps, it is imperative that we continue to develop an operational art tailored to the unique requirements of MOOTW, and that we incorporate it into the training and education of our officer corp.

This paper has considered only at a few aspects of operational art which apply to MOOTW. There are many others which must be examined as well. Hopefully by looking at them, and refining operational art for MOOTW, our record in future involvements in these demanding scenarios will be much improved over that of our past.

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